Transforming Ethnic Conflict and Building Peace in the Chittagong Hill Tracts, Bangladesh

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Abstract

The Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) has experienced conflicts and violence in both colonial and post-colonial periods. Ethnic violence in post-independence Bangladesh exists there since the 1980s. Despite the formal ending of the armed conflict between the state security forces and the peace force of the indigenous people with a peace treaty in 1997, the intercommunal violence continues in the CHT. This paper explores the salient factors of the CHT conflict by applying the social cubism model within a critical and emancipatory peacebuilding framework. The CHT conflict results from the dispossession of the indigenous communities from their ancestors' land, the deprivation of the indigenous people of their traditional and customary practices with nature and environment, and the silence over their histories, needs and identities. This paper argues that the CHT conflict is complex and protracted due to interlocking conflict factors that need to be considered in order to transform the conflict and build peace in the CHT territory of Bangladesh. This paper has immense research and policy implications for transformative and constructive peacebuilding in the CHT by addressing the social cube's multi-causal driving forces of the ongoing ethnic violence.

Keywords: Chittagong Hill Tracts, ethnic conflict, peacebuilding, social cubism

Introduction

Bangladesh (formerly East Pakistan) became an independent nation state in 1971. With a land area of only 147,000 skm, Bangladesh is the home for over 160 million people (BBS, 2016). The ethnic groups comprise 1.10 percent of the total population (BBS, 2011). The Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) indigenous population accounts for 0.0049 percent of the total population of the country (Gurr, 1993). The CHT comprising three hilly districts - Khagrachari, Rangamati and Bandarban - has an area of 5,093 square miles that constitute about 10 percent of the total land area of Bangladesh (UNDP, 2005; Uddin, 2016). The CHT has a total population of 1,587,000, of which about half are indigenous people (BBS, 2015; Uddin, 2016).

The CHT, located in the southeast of Bangladesh, is a confluence of two regions - South Asia and Southeast Asia bordered by Myanmar on the southeast, the Indian state of Tripura in the north and Mizoram on the east, and the Chittagong district in the west. The CHT, surrounded by hills, forests, rivers, and lakes with scenic beauty, is rich in cultural heritage and natural resources. It is the home for thirteen indigenous (*adivasi* in Bengali) peoples who have been living there for centuries, at least from the fifteenth century (Adnan, 2004; Schendel et al., 2000; Datta, 2015).

The Chakma is the largest ethnic group (about half of the ethnic minority population) followed by the *Marma* and the *Tripura* among CHT's different tribal communities, each having their own cultural identity (MAR, 2016; Uddin, 2016). Other major *adivasi* (indigenous) groups are the *Bawm*, the *Mro*, the *Tanchangya*, the *Chak*, the *Pangkho*, the *Lushai*, the *Khyang* and the *Khumi* (Uddin, 2016). Indigenous communities are heterogeneous by faith, most are the followers of Buddhism, Hinduism, Christianity, and animism, while the Bengalis are mostly Muslims (Uddin, 2016; Partha, 2016). The tribal groups speak multiple languages, practice religious traditions, and are racially related to the tribes in neighboring Burma, Northeast India, and Thailand (MAR, 2016; Uddin, 2016). The CHT's tribal groups form an identity often called the *Jumma* nation (Chowdhury, 2014; Datta, 2015; MOCHTA, 2015; Adnan, 2004; Chowdhury, 2008; Dastidar & Adnan, 2011; Roy, 2000). The term '*Jumma* ' is derived from the word '*jhum*' meaning shifting cultivation (slush and burn) on the hills (*pahar* in Bengali) practiced by these indigenous communities (Uddin, 2016).

The CHT has hosted one of the world's least known deadliest and longest violent conflicts (IWGIA, 2012; Chakma, 2010; Adnan, & Dastagir, 2011; Adnan, 2004; Mohsin, 1997; Roy, 2000). The *Parbatya Chattagram Jana Shanhati Samity (PCJSS) meaning* Chittagong Hill Tracts People's Solidarity Association was formed in 1972 as a regional political movement for the cultural recognition and political autonomy of the CHT. It organized hill tribes politically based on the *Jumma* identity to pursue a secessionist movement against the state (Adnan, 2004; Chakma, 2010; IWGIA, 2012). This tribal war resulted from the "fear of marginalization, sense of relative deprivation, and sense of powerlessness" among the CHT people (Shahadevan, 2003, p. 405).

The armed conflict since 1976 between the *Shanti Bahini* (Peace Force) of the CHT indigenous peoples led by PCJSS and the state's security forces challenged the newly independent nation that just got independence in 1971 (Shahadevan, 2003). Given the reality of no win for the indigenous people nor for the state security forces, the CHT war ended in political negotiation in 1997. Despite the formal ending of the armed violence between the state security forces and indigenous rebel groups with the surrender of arms by at least 2,000 rebels two decades ago, intercommunal violence is continuing (Uddin, 2016; AWGIA, 2012; Chakma, 2010; Adnan, 2004).

This paper examines the CHT conflict from a critical and emancipatory peacebuilding (CEP) lens. The paper has three main sections. The theoretical framework section highlights the social cubism model underneath CEP and the importance of the local perspective of the causes of the conflict and the locally driven peacebuilding in the CHT based on a review of available literature. The analysis section involves the six conflict factors of the CHT conflict in both pre-and post-CHT peace accord. The last section critically discusses the post-accord conflict, and transformative peacebuilding in the CHT.

Theoretical Framework

The CHT conflict is apparently, in Lederach's (1997) term, an intrastate conflict between indigenous minorities of the CHT and the state in Bangladesh. Given the involvement of the minority indigenous peoples and the dominant Bengalis, the CHT conflict can be designated as an inter-communal, ethnic, and identity conflict. The CHT conflict is ethno-political as it involves intertwining of identity and politics (Carter et al., 2009) around the *Jumma* nation's demand for self-determination or political autonomy rights. Since the CHT conflict is lodged in long-standing relationships of animosity, perception of enmity, and deep-rooted fear between indigenous peoples and Bengalis, the CHT conflict, in Lederach's (2009) words, is 'protracted' and 'intractable'. Despite the peace accord, the continuation of violence and conflicts remind us of the CHT's current stats as *no war no peace* in Mac Ginty's (2006) view.

The causes of a complex conflict cannot be adequately explained with any single factor, any single theory, or any single level of analysis (Hauss, 2010; Levy, 2007; MacGinty & Williams, 2009; Gurr, 2007; Lederach, 1997). This paper explores the CHT conflict, applying the social cubism analytical model (Byrne & Carter, 1996; Byrne et al., 2001) within a critical and emancipatory peacebuilding framework. The critical and emancipatory peacebuilding (CEP) process constructively nurtures grassroots cross-communal relations as well as deconstructs unjust social, cultural, economic, and political structures (Mac Ginty, 2008, 2013a; Richmond, 2011). CEP is centered around the emancipatory issues of empowerment, agency, inclusion, resiliency, and grassroots approaches to peacebuilding that includes those on the margins of the local (Özerdem, 2016). Local resistance, and local stories are found in the socially embedded networks, practices, relations, and spaces of everyday life (Chandler, 2017). Critical and emancipatory peacebuilding emphasizes the local perspective in the peacebuilding processes (Richmond, 2007, 2011). CEP includes local people in locally driven peacebuilding, minority voices with their resistance to dominant discourses and powerful actors as vital components of positive peace or social justice. Although most of the previous studies investigated the CHT issues from the perspectives of sociology, anthropology and development studies, the CHT conflict remains under-researched in the field of peace and conflict studies. Moreover, social cubism has never been explored either alone or within a CEP framework in the CHT conflict context.

Social cubism is a multidimensional perspective that includes not only political and structural factors but also psychological and cultural forces to understand the complex pattern of ethnopolitical conflict. Six interlocking facets of the social cube model of conflict include demographics, economics, history, politics, psycho-culture, and religion (Byrne & Senehi, 2012). "A holistic, social cubism approach to intergroup conflict must account for how social and psychocultural mechanism interacts to exacerbate or, indeed, ameliorate ethnoterritorial conflicts" (Byrne & Carter, 2002, p. 763). Both Northern Ireland

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and Quebec conflicts exhibit these micro and macro social forces of the social cube (Byrne & Carter, 2002). The analytical potential of the interlocking social cube model lies in its consideration of both material and psychological factors as the drivers or sources of an ethnoterritorial conflict (Byrne & Carter, 2002). Social cubism is a qualitative approach that considers how the relationships among the six conflict factors - "demographics (e.g., double minority-double majority, space), economics (e.g., poverty, internal colonialism), history (e.g., golden age, events), politics (e.g., nationalism, populism), psychoculture (e.g., identity, fear, symbols), and religion (e.g., true believers, sectarianism)" (Byrne & Senehi, 2012, p. 141) are important to understand how ethnic conflict evolves, transforms and ends.

Numerous studies have been conducted on the CHT by colonial administrators during the colonial rule (1757-1947), by Western scholars during the Pakistan period (1947-1971) and by Bangladeshi and foreign academicians, intellectuals, and journalists during the Bangladesh period (from 1971 onwards) (Sajib & Sohad, 2018; Halim & Chowdhury, 2016). Most of the academic studies undertaken during the Pakistani and Bangladeshi period used anthropological perspectives (Uddin, 2016). Many publications on the CHT (Chowdhury, 2014; IAGA, 2012; Levene, 1999; Panday & Jamil, 2009) focused on human rights violations in the CHT. Some recent publications in the post-accord period examine the peace accord implementation (IWGIA, 2012; UNDP, 2005; Partha, 2016; UNDP, 2005; Jamil & Panday, 2008; Chakma, 2008, 2010; Adnan & Dastidar, 2011), the role of non-government organizations (NGOs) or grassroots organizations in peacebuilding (Chakma, 2018; Gerharz, 2002, 2014), and development and peacebuilding (Chakma, 2017; Sajib & Sohad, 2018; Barakat, 2016; Gerharz, 2014). A handful of PhD and master's theses on the CHT examine the land problem, and the relations of land, nature and geography to the livelihoods of indigenous peoples (Ahmed, 2017; Adnan, 2013, 2004; Chowdhury, 2016; Chowdhury, 2012; Chowdhury, 2005; Datta, 2015; Hasan, 2014). A number of recent studies attached the failure of addressing the local needs and participation to the ongoing CHT conflict, and the failure of the CHT peace accord (Partha, 2016; Chakma, 2018; Uddin, 2017; Uddin, 2012; Chakma, 2017, 2018; Sajib & Sohad, 2018; Halim & Chowdhury, 2016; Gerharz, 2002, 2014). Some studies indicate the resiliency of the indigenous peoples amid the protracted conflict situations even after signing the peace accord, and multiple survival strategies in relation to the context of CHT's land scarcity and insecurity realities (Uddin, 2016). Chakma (2017) argues that the CHT has witnessed a donor-driven top-down peacebuilding approach that cannot ensure the local ownership of the peace process. Barakat (2016), using a political economy approach, finds the core-periphery relation between the state and the CHT, and links the state's demographic, political, and economic engineering to the unpeopling of indigenous people in the CHT. To him, the indigenous peoples are victims of exploitation-destitution-distress-discrimination-deprivation-inequality. The indigenous people in the CHT have experienced extermination, marginalization and deprivation in all forms and dimensions. They have been unpeopled and exterminated through grabbing of their own land, settlement, forest, and other resources (Barakat, 2016). An integrated critical holistic perspective is necessary to comprehend the local perspective of the macro and micro causes of the conflict and of the peacebuilding process in the CHT. The six analytical factors expounded by the Social Cube model provides a comprehensive picture of the CHT conflict.

Social Cubism Analysis of the CHT Conflict

Historical Factors of the CHT Conflict

The history of groups in conflict involves the golden past and historical experiences of each

group that in turn devalues the histories and identities of other groups (Reimer et al, 2015). History, recounted by conflicting groups, emphasizes different interpretations of past events and characterizations of other groups that can increase hostility in inter-group behavior (Byrne & Carter, 2002). The CHT conflict's historical factors begin with the tribalism policy of the British colonizers dividing the CHT people into tribal/hill people (*paharis*) and the Bengalis to expand their authority and power and exploit environmental resources such as forests (Rahman et al., 2018; Adnan, 2004; Jashimuddin & Inouse, 2012; Datta, 2015; Chowdhury, 2014). The British incorporated the CHT as an administrative district of Bengal in 1860 and proclaimed it as *Tribal dominated area* and *Totally excluded area* under the Chittagong Hill Tracts Regulation of 1900, and the Government of India Act of 1935 respectively.

The Pakistani and Bangladeshi governments have continued similar policies mostly centering economic interests in the CHT (Adnan & Dastidar, 2011; Chakma, 2010; IWGIA, 2012; Rahman, 2015, 2017; Schendel et al., 2000). The Pakistani government abolished the CHT's special status by enacting a new law in 1964 and undertook different projects since the 1960s ignoring the CHT's traditional culture and customary practices. For example, the Karnafully Paper Mill project initiated in 1953 and the Kapati Dam constructed in the Karnafully River for hydropower project in 1957 displaced the indigenous people and dispossessed them of their lands. The Kaptai Dam flooded CHT's cultivable agricultural land, displaced many indigenous people internally and forced many to flee to neighboring Indian states (Adnan, 2004; Schendel et al., 2001; Mohsin, 2002; Chakma, 2010). The victims who were evicted from their homes and lands because of the Karnafully Paper Mill project undertaken in 1953 and the Kapati Dam in 1957 were not given any compensation.

After the independence of the country in 1971, the Bangladeshi government from 1972 undertook massive Bengali resettlement policies, infrastructure plans, and development schemes in the CHT (e.g., transportation, forestry, agriculture, and manufacturing). The resettlement of 400,000 outsiders (Bengali settlers from the mainland) in the CHT affected not only the lives of indigenous communities but also the environment - soil fertility, the relations of ethnic communities with nature, land, plants, animals, the biodiversity, and land management practices (Chakma, 2010; Adnan, 2004; Roy, 1996; Datta, 2015).

Demographic Factors of the CHT Conflict

Demographics involve multiple forces including ethnicity and socioeconomic factors that can have huge influence on the conflict. The CHT's demographics have significantly changed after the British rule. The CHT has experienced the declining population growth rate because of the resettlement of the non-indigenous Bengalis especially by the Pakistani and Bangladeshi governments (Partha, 2016; Uddin, 2016). Different governments' undertaking of development projects contributed to slow down the growth rate among the indigenous population in the CHT area. The Bengalis constituted only about 11.6 percent of the CHT population in 1974 (i.e. pre-settlement period), but according to the 1991 population census, they constituted about 48.5 percent of the total population of the CHT (MOCHTA, 2015; IWGIA, 2012). According to the 2011 population census, the Jumma people constitute about half of the total population of the three CHT districts (BBS, 2015).

Bangladeshi governments have implemented a policy to *Bengalize* the CHT. A massive-scale demographic engineering happened within the first decade of the independence of the country. Despite the resistance from local *Pahari* communities, 200,000 to 450,000 lowland Bengalis were resettled in the CHT (Chakma, 2010; Adnan, 2004; IWGIA, 2012; Uddin, 2016; Partha, 2016). This overpopulation

has affected the lives and cultures of indigenous communities living in the CHT. Within a short span of time, the majority indigenous population has become the minority population (Adnan, 2004; Schendel et al., 2000; Chakma, 2010; Roy, 1996; Mohsin, 1997; Gerharz, 2014; Uddin, 2016; Partha, 2016; Barakat, 2016).

Economic Factors of the CHT Conflict

Economic factors are linked to resources and power that are embedded in structural inequalities and economic disparities among the conflicting groups. Land is a critical factor in the CHT conflict. The CHT's economic potentials with a mix of rivers, hills, forests, lakes and natural fountains led the British, Pakistani, and Bangladeshi authorities to colonize this ethnic territory. The British colonizer initiated exploitative projects such as reserve forest, timber logging, and cotton plantation that affected their customary rights to land, and freedom (Mohsin, 1997; Chakma, 2010; Adnan, 2004, Adnan & Dastidar, 2011; Schendel et al., 2001; Chowdhury, 2014; Datta, 2015). Around 1868, British colonialists created *Reserve Forests*, and this policy forced some indigenous peoples to move to Myanmar and India.

Post-colonial policies and projects since the 1960s have not addressed the CHT's needs and welfare (Mohsin, 202; Roy, 2002; Chakma, 2010; Datta, 2015). The abolition of the CHT Act of 1900 by the Pakistani government in 1964 opened the CHT more to the outsiders. The Pakistani government constructed the Kaptai Dam project in 1962 to generate hydropower from the Karnafully river (Uddin, 2016; Adnan, 2004; Schendel et al, 2000). This project flooded 40 percent of the CHT's best agricultural land and displaced 100,000 indigenous people (Uddin, 2016; Adnan, 2004; Schendel et al., 2001; Mohsin, 2002; Chakma, 2010; Chowdhury, 2014; Datta, 2015). Indigenous peoples, mostly *Chakmas,* were internally displaced, and around 55,000 displaced people accepted refugee status in the bordering Indian states: Tripura, Arunachal Prodesh, and Mizoram (Uddin, 2016; Schendel et al., 2000).

Successive Bangladeshi governments colonized the CHT's land ignoring the needs and interests of its indigenous people (Shahadevan, 2003; Adnan, 2004; Datta, 2015). The indigenous peoples' ancestral customary lands have been allotted to the non-indigenous Bengali settlers. The Bengalis were brought under state resettlement schemes and given food rations under the military's pacification program with a view to increasing the number of non-indigenous population in the CHT. The political patronization in the CHT sided with the political elites, leaders of different occupational cooperatives and other big businesspersons, and facilitated grabbing of land and building up a Bengali-centric leadership. Bangladeshi governments' policy of ethnic colonization and internal colonialism (for example, large-scale settlement of Bengalis in the CHT) created a sense of relative deprivation, alienation, marginalization, and powerlessness (Shahadevan, 2003).

Demographic shifts and development projects led thousands of *adivasis* into poverty, insecurity and alienation from the land. Many indigenous families have been evicted and become homeless. The post-conflict violence has been fueled neither by nationalist ethnic sentiment, nor by external security concerns, but rather by the political economy of land and natural resources. The undertaking of security infrastructures, businesses, roads, resorts, picnic spots, tourist spots, park, motels, tourism, and social forestry programs in the name of economic development (MOCHTA, 2015) have happened at the cost of the indigenous people. Land acquisition has been implanted for non-security and non-tourist purposes, such as for setting up a Buddhist meditation center. Although ethnic, nationalist sentiments have been used repeatedly to inflame the conflict, what lies behind is the interest of land-grabbers and the political

elite who have support from state forces. Tribal people felt subjugation to Bengalis as government undertook biased development programs that benefited Bengalis while denying tribal interests. As a result, indigenous people resorted to insurgency to protect their ancestors' land, cultural traditions and rights, and the state resorted to counter-insurgency, considering the insurgency as antinationalist and terrorist activity (Mohsin, 1997; Roy, 2002; Chakma, 2010, Datta, 2015).

Political Factors of the CHT Conflict

According to the social cube theory, politics includes power distributed across and the political institutions and mechanisms used by the groups in conflict. The CHT's policies, institutions, and structural mechanisms have ignored indigenous people's needs since the British period. The British Raj enacted the first forest act for its economic interests, and development schemes based on environmental resources started to dispossess the indigenous people of their ancestors' land, and marginalize hill peoples (Chowdhury, 2014; Sivaramakrishnan, 1995, 1997 as cited in Chowdhuty, 2014).

To counter the ethnic insurgency in the CHT, Bangladeshi government initiated massive-scale resettlement of Bengalis in the CHT, bringing poor Bengalis from other parts of the country within the first decade of independence. The state patronized Bengali settlers and their illegal settlement as well as allocated indigenous people's customary land to the Bengali settlers in the name of development, law and order, and sovereignty for political gains. Jumma nationalists' demand for autonomy led to the militarization policy in the CHT and was treated as a secessionist challenge to Bengali nationalism and as a conspiracy against the sovereignty of Bangladesh (Shahadevan, 2003). Government documents and policies display political elites' narratives that the tribal people are violent, terrorist, anti-development, anti-nationalist elements, and threat to the sovereignty and prosperity of the country. Anti-Bengali narratives can be understood from the Bangladeshi security forces' declaration that they wanted "the soil and not the people" (Shahadevan, 2003).

The CHT's armed conflict between the military forces and the organized armed group (called *Shanti Bahini*) took over 25,000 lives in the entire course of the conflict. The CHT conflict displaced many indigenous peoples from their ancestors' land, and many of them became refugees in neighboring India. After four decades of bloody armed violence, a peace treaty was signed between the Shanti Bahini led by PCJSS leader, Santu Larma, and the government of Bangladesh under the leadership of Prime Minister (PM) Sheikh Hasina on December 2, 1997. The Bangladeshi government had a diplomatic success in receiving India's support to end cross-border movement of the Chakma rebels. Rebels used to cross the border and mix with the Chakma refugees in India's northeast region and had received sympathetic military support from the insurgent groups of India's northeast regions.

Despite the successful political negotiation resulting in the peace accord, the CHT peace accord has failed to address the issues of land rights, rights to self-determination, and cultural rights (Barakat, 2016; Chakma, 2017, 2018; Uddin, 2016; Uddin, 2012, 2017). Following the CHT peace accord, the Ministry of Chittagong Hill Tracts Affairs (MOCHTA) was formed in 1998 but the formation of its affiliates - Chittagong Hill Tracts Regional Council, Rangamati Hill Tracts District Council, Bandarban Hill Tracts District Council, and Khagrachhari Hill Tracts District Council was delayed (IWGIA, 2012, Chittagong Hill Tracts Commission, 2015). The delayed formation of boards/councils including the Land Dispute Resolution Commission and the constitution of boards/councils based on patron-client relations have promoted the Bengalis over the indigenous communities. Certain tribal elites also take advantage of state power and economic benefits by sitting on CHT boards and councils.

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The PCJSS Chakma leaders are often blamed for taking the advantage of state power and economic benefits by sitting on the CHT boards and councils under the peace treaty accorded in 1997. The internal fractions in the PCJSS led by the movement's leader Jyotirindra Bodhipriya Larma with the new regional party called the United People's Democratic Front (UPDF) - the anti-peace treaty faction - further complicated the CHT conflict. This internal factional violence killed hundreds of hill people since the creation of UPDF in 2008 by M. N. Larma over his dissatisfaction on the implementation status of the peace treaty.

The Chittagong Hill Tracts Development Board, Refugee Rehabilitation Task Force, and local government bodies created under the CHT Local Government Act of 1989 have not addressed indigenous rights and needs as per the treaty. The Chittagong Hill Tracts Land Dispute Resolution Commission Act of 2001 has yet to be consistent with the peace treaty of 1997. The Land Dispute Resolution Commission has failed to resolve land disputes and to award the land rights that the *adivasis* customarily have inherited for centuries, and it has neither removed illegal settlers nor recovered the land allocated for rubber plantations to non-locals. Manipulating the land documents with the help of the corrupt officials, the state and the local political leaders from major political parties of the country patronize the Bengali settlers, businessmen, and corporations to illegally grab lands of the indigenous people and deprive them of their customary land rights.

In the post-conflict age, the state's land acquisition for law and order has increased the presence of personnel of security forces: the Bangladesh Police (BP), Border Guard Bangladesh (BGB), and the Bangladesh Army. According to Barakat (2016), grabbing of land, settlement, forest and other resources by the state, settlers, security forces or corporates lead to unpeopling and extermination of indigenous people in the CHT. The establishment of infrastructures for businesses, roads, tourism, and forestry programs in the name of economic development has not addressed the needs of the indigenous peoples in the CHT region. Since the colonial time, indigenous people's land rights have been neglected. The CHT Jumma people's needs of land for shelter and *jhum* cultivation, livelihood security, cultural rights and identity have been threatened by the Bengali settlers and by the state's discriminatory policies and structural mechanisms. Apart from governmental acquisition, grabbing by the powerful including Bengali settlers, through forged documents, land record forgery, and lack of documents are other main reasons and means of land dispossession of indigenous people (Barakat, 2016).

The Bengali settlements, and the camps of security forces being raided several times in 1976, the state established more than a dozen army camps in the CHT territory by 1981 (Amnesty International, 2003; Islam, 2003). The militarization policy has not only increased the military size, but increasingly involved the military in establishing and managing tourist spots (MOCHTA, 2017; IWGIA, 2012). Despite promising to end the army occupation in the CHT, full time army camps have continued to operate in the CHT and many more such camps are being planned (IWGIA, 2012). The state took the ethnic militancy and terrorism in the CHT as a serious security, and law and order issue (Rahman & Kashem, 2011). More than 8,500 people were killed in raids and counter raids, including 2,500 civilians, hundreds of houses were torched by Bengali settlers and Bangladesh Army during 1973-2010 (Amnesty International, 2003; IWGIA, 2012). During the insurgency, communal violence, murders, kidnapping, and sexual assaults were common. During 1998-2016, the inter-group conflicts took more than 700 lives. Between 2004 and 2012, the Bangladeshi army alone committed a total of 1,487 human rights violations. Many see the communal riots, rape, murder, and arson attacks as a mechanism of pressuring Indigenous

families and communities to leave their traditional land apart from the military-led counter-insurgency measures in the 1980s and 1990s (Chakma, 2010 as cited in Datta, 2015).

There are pro- and anti- peace treaty peoples in the CHT. PCJSS led by the movement's leader, Jyotirindra Bodhipriya Larma, is the main outlet through which the Hill people express their demands for full implementation of the peace accord, including land ownership rights, withdrawal of army and Bengali resettlement in the CHT (MAR, 2016). The peace treaty divides the indigenous and Bengalis as well as the different indigenous groups like the Chakma and smaller tribal groups because of the position and power of the largest tribal groups secured under the peace treaty and laws (MAR, 2016). Although the call for war attracted many Chakmas (the largest tribal population group), two major groups - the Marma and Tripuri - did not fully support the PCJSS. The government, using factionalism in the PCJSS, tried to cultivate the Manna and Murang tribes by special development schemes (including amnesties and cash awards) to leave insurgency.

Since the signing of the peace accord, several new resistance organizations have emerged within the indigenous communities. The United Peoples Democratic Front (UPDF) and the PCJSS Reformist Group are two remarkable organizations. The Bengalis are naturally anti-treaty since the treaty has provisions to limit the Bengalis' resettlement and to return the land to the indigenous communities. The Bengalis under the banner of different forums and movements demonstrate that their equal rights are violated through the CHT peace accord. The Somo Odhikar Andolon (Equal Rights Movement) and other such groups are playing the ethnic nationalism card. The right-wing media depicted CHT Commission as anti-Bengali, and government policies as secessionist policies for the Bengalis. This anti-peace treaty sentiment and narratives are destructive for the peaceful coexistence of both groups, and the implementation of the peace treaty.

Psycho-cultural Factors of the CHT Conflict

Psycho-cultural factors refer to the psychological and cultural issues that are significant to the groups in conflict. Emotions and symbols attached to these issues are linked to intergroup interaction and shape group perceptions. The CHT is not homogeneous in terms of the cultural markers of ethnic groups, yet the *Paharis* (peoples living in the hills) constitute a rich *Jumma* nation of indigenous communities in relation to ethnicity, geographic region, and culture. The Jumma identity is the indicative of their historical occupation of slash and burn cultivation in the CHT. From the British colonial period till now, the ethic and cultural identity of the CHT *adivasis* (indigenous people) has been threatened (Partha, 2016; Adnan, 2004). The *Jumma* culture is clearly different from the Bengali culture.

The CHT is the homeland for the *Pahari* communities, yet the British as well as Pakistani and Bangladeshi authorities have ignored their histories, socio-cultural issues and cultural identity. Because of colonial and neo-colonial policies and projects, many local people became unhappy for occupying their ancestors' land and disconnecting them with the environment (land, animals, plants, and so on) (Adnan, 2004; Chakma, 2010; Datta, 2015; Chowdhury, 2014). By patronizing Bengali settlers for illegal settlement and allocating the CHT customary land to the encroachers, the state has engendered grief, fear, frustration, anger, and emotion. Viewing the resettlement of Bengalis as encroachment, the *Paharis* feel fear and threatened by an increased land grabbing in the name of development and increased militarization in the name of law and order in the CHT.

The Bengalis are being projected as minorities while tribal people are labeled violent, terrorist,

anti-development and anti-nationalist elements as well as threats to the sovereignty and peace of the country. The state patronizes certain groups of non-tribal elites by allowing illegal logging, and land-leasing for commercial plantation and tobacco type businesses in the CHT.

Many members of the indigenous communities or the Bengalis in the CHT do not seem to be happy with the peace treaty given the backlash by various ethnic groups and organizations, and inadequate implementation of the CHT peace treaty (AWGIA, 2012; Chakma, 2010; Adnan, 2004). The 1997 peace accord also kept the term 'tribe' intact instead of *adibhasi meaning indigenous people* (MOCHT, 2015), which is the indicative of colonial mindset to not acknowledge their self-recognition and cultural identity. The ministry's website does not recognize the conflict from the rights and welfare perspective of the indigenous people (MOCHTA, 2015).

The immunity from prosecution and impunity for human rights abuses by the military or law enforcement, as well as the division and the creation of new political and pressure groups among indigenous people, and the formation of new groups among the Bengalis with the slogan of equal rights and nationalism are other escalators of the conflict. The backlash of anti-treaty strikes, vandalism of government properties, the blockade of the CHT peace treaty monitoring body's visit, and frequent violent attacks on the hilly people indicate the possibility of the re-escalation of violence in the future (AWGIA, 2012; Chowdhury, 2014; Datta, 2015).

Religious Factors of the CHT Conflict

According to the social cube model, religion is used as a political instrument to create divisions and mobilize violence among conflicting groups. Heterogeneously religious, indigenous communities are mostly the followers of Buddhism, Hinduism, Christianity, and animism, and the *Bengalis* are predominantly Muslims (Dewan, 1990; Partha, 2016). Religious differences between the *Jumma* and the *Bengalis have* not played a dominant role in the CHT conflict, but the *Bengalis'* cultural imperialism has predominated the CHT (IWGA, 2012; Chowdhury, 2014; Datta, 2015; Partha, 2016). Although the *Jumma* nation is not homogeneous in terms of ethnicity, language, religion, and culture, it does share cultural markers, such as mode of life, customs, practices and economic and political systems because the people have lived on the exclusive hilly areas for centuries.

The Bengalis have changed the original names of localities/settlements, disrupted the celebration of religious and cultural festivals/rituals, and harassed religious leaders (Partha, 2016). Businesses have mushroomed to meet the cultural traditions of the Muslim and Bengali settlers, officials, and NGO workers. The *Jumma* communities' traditional customary legal and political systems executed by *Jumma* leader, *Karbari* (headman and chief), dealing with law and order disputes, have been defied by the Bengalis in the CHT (Partha, 2016). On the grounds of anti-Muslim sensitive posting on Facebook by a Buddhist from the CHT, attacks on Buddhist temples, and torching Buddhist houses by the *Bengalis* indicate the intolerance level of the Bengalis and the political patronization of such acts on the indigenous people.

Post-Accord Conflict, Conflict Transformation, and Peacebuilding in the CHT

The Chittagong Hill Tracts Peace Accord (CHTPA) is a landmark in the political annals of Bangladesh. Signed in 1997 after two decades of a bloody armed violence, the CHT peace treaty promised

to end conflict, ensure land rights to indigenous people, revive their cultural identities, rehabilitate displaced people, withdraw military from the CHT and give self-rule (Jamil & Panday, 2008; Tripura, 2017). The CHT accord was considered a turning point for the stability in the CHT territory as well as for the South Asia region. In fact, it created a congenial atmosphere for the international community to take part in the development and peacebuilding (Chakma, 2008; Chakma, 2017, 2018; Sajib & Sohad, 2018).

Although the CHT enjoyed a kind of autonomy in the Mughal and British period as their customary land rights and practices were not substantially affected (Uddin, 2016; Chakma, 2018; Roy, 2000, 2014). This paper finds the land as the critical factor, and Barakat (2016) refers to unpeopling of the indigenous people through unjust land acquisition and land dispossession. This unpeopling of indigenous people in the CHT began during the British period through their exploitation of forest and other environmental resources, and by bringing non-CHT people from the mainland into the CHT for their economic interests (Barakat, 2016; Chowdhury, 2014; Halim & Chowdhury, 2016; Schendel et al., 2000; Partha, 2016). The demographic engineering policy was designed by the colonial rulers first for their economic interest. But the Pakistani government's massive demographic engineering was intended to replace the indigenous minority with non-indigenous people for political control of the territory, leading to 'unpeopling' in Barakat's (2016) term. The Bangladeshi government's transmigration program inherited the same logic with added agenda of counter insurgency in the 1980s (Barakat, 2016; Partha, 2016; Chakma, 2010, 2018; Chakma, 2008). The state increased the number of outsiders purposively to address insurgency and redirect their political autonomy demand. Indigenous people resorted to insurgency to protect their ancestors' land, cultural traditions and rights on the one hand, and the state resorted to counterinsurgency considering the insurgency as antinationalist and terrorist activity (Mohsin, 202; Roy, 2002; Chakma, 2010). The two -decades- long (1976-1997) armed conflict between the state forces and the insurgent groups in the CHT took over 25,000 lives, and forced more than 100,000 indigenous people to flee to neighbouring country, India (Chakma, 2010; Adnan, 2004; Datta, 2015; Dewan, 1990; Chowdhury, 2014; Schendel et al., 2000).

Despite the CHT people's demand for using the globally established word 'indigenous', the Bangladeshi government kept the word 'tribe', which the colonial government first used, intact in the peace accord (Halim, Chowdhury, 2016; Barakat, 2016; Uddin, 2016; Gerharz, 2014). In fact, the political will of the Bangladeshi rulers regarding the CHT could be traced from the state-building policy since independence in 1971. The Bangladeshi Constitution does not acknowledge ethnic minorities, but instead use the words - tribe, ethnic minorities, small ethnic groups (Barakat, 2016; Uddin, 2016). In independent Bangladesh, the indigenous people did not accept the father of the nation's policy of Bengali nationalism (Chakma, 2008, 2010; Jamil & Panday, 2008). The CHT people find the state building project based on Bengali nationalism (Bengali monoculturalism) to be assimilatory, which ignores their identity, culture and language, and without safeguarding their rights for self-determination (Partha, 2016; Chowdhury, 2012).

The colonial administration first used the term 'tribe' that is still being used by the Bangladeshi government today (Gerharz, 2014; Partha, 2016). The British colonialist used the 'divide and rule' policy to control the CHT territory for economic and political reasons (Rahman et al., 2018). This 'divide and rule' policy has been continued as a colonial legacy as echoed in the measures of dismissing the special status law, constructing the Kaptai dame project, and massive resettlement of poor people from the mainland in the CHT during the Pakistani age. It is also reflected in the policies and programs

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of land acquisition, militarization, *Bengalization*, and commercial operations of the resources during the Bangladeshi period. Barakat (2013) tags demographic, political and economic engineering to the unpeopling and extermination of indigenous people in the CHT since the 1960s. The constitutional non-recognition of indigenous people, the CHT accord's avoidance of the term 'indigenous', and the non-granting of territorial autonomy involve various rationalities of the Bangladeshi governments and Bengali politicians (Chakma, 2017, 2018; Chakma, 2008; Barakat, 2016; Partha, 2016; Uddin, 2011; Uddin, 2016). One such reason is the pre-partition loyalty of the CHT people to joining India. Another is the concern over the newly independent state's sovereignty because of the indigenous insurgency movement demanding for the autonomy of the CHT. The military's concern over demilitarization is the potential danger of terrorism and violence within the indigenous people and between indigenous and non-indigenous people. Besides, pre-accord and post-accord regional and geopolitical concerns are linked to the stability and security of the region (Barakat, 2016). Amid the CHT insurgency, the Bangladeshi government wanted to stabilize the CHT by bringing the PCJSS into the table, but their attempts were affected because of India's offer of safe haven to the PCJSS leaders. The symbiotic relationship of the CHT insurgents with Indian seven sisters' counterparts, and with Arakanese insurgents has been reported (Rahman, 2016). The recent Myanmar military's operations in the Arakan state against the Rakhine and Rohingya insurgents pose a serious threat to the security and stability in the CHT area. The geographic morphology of the CHT facilitates the operations of various organized crimes like drug trade, arms smuggling, and militancy. Barakat (2016) rightly mentions that geopolitics is one of the major reasons behind the land alienation, demographic engineering and militarization in the CHT.

The CHT has witnessed anti-peace treaty backlash within indigenous peoples and Bengalis, the creation of new political and pressure groups among both indigenous people and the Bengalis (Uddin, 2016; AWGIA, 2012; Chakma, 2010; Adnan, 2004). There has been another intrinsic cleavage among the indigenous groups over the control and benefit of the peace accord. This intra-ethnic division has been rooted in the size and power blocks between three larger indigenous groups and other smaller indigenous groups. Smaller groups lack trust on the PCJSS leadership which is led by the larger indigenous groups. Smaller groups also find the bigger groups suspicious for their vested interests in the peace accord as the larger groups are the beneficiary of the accord. Most members of the majority groups hold power and enjoy better economic opportunities.

The conflict between army-backed Bengali settlers and the indigenous people has continued and inter-group conflicts have taken more than 700 lives (Basha, 2011). Over the years since the signing of the peace accord, repeated direct violence including communal riots, rape, murder, and arson attacks between indigenous people and Bengali people, between the state forces and local people, and between different groups of indigenous people on various grounds and issue have continued. The accord was not, however, welcomed by all groups of the CHT indigenous groups. They were unhappy with some clauses of the treaty. Dissatisfied with the treaty, some groups of the indigenous people came out from the PCJSS and formed a political party known as United People's Democratic Front (UPDF). The PCJSS and the UPDF, thus, surfaced with two opposing ideologies that wrecked cohesion and wreaked division of the indigenous people who gradually got involved in violence, human rights violations and fratricidal killings (Jamil & Panday, 2008). Yet, the Jumma carries their shared trajectories of oppression, marginalization and deprivation (Uddin, 2016; Barakat, 2016).

The Bengalis under the banner of different forums and movements such as the Somo Odhikar

Andolon (Equal Rights Movement) demonstrate that their equal rights are violated through the CHT peace accord. The Bengalis protest the CHT Commission, and the peace accord and demand that the functioning of the CHT Commission should be suspended. Anti-treaty strikes, vandalism of government properties, blockade of the CHT peace treaty monitoring body's visit, and frequent violent attacks on the hilly people indicate the early warnings signs of violence re-escalation between the indigenous and the Bengali people (AWIGA, 2012).

The Bangladeshi government and political elites have used the ethnic divisions to perpetuate the agenda as many argue that the Bengali politicians were not eager for the full implementation of the CHT accord, and also many of the clauses of the peace treaty cannot be implemented, which will be highlighted later in this section. As the treaty was against the will of this opposition party, the Bangladesh Nationalist Party showed no interest in implementing the accord when it came to power in 2001 for five years. Given the election manifestos of the current ruling party – Bangladesh Awami League, who signed the peace accord in 1997, and has been in power since 2009 for third consecutive tenure, took some significant measures for the implementation of the peace accord by enacting the land dispute act, and empowering the CHT commission,

All Bangladeshi governments since the first post-independent Sheikh Mujub government have viewed the development and welfare of the CHT indigenous people as pathways toward peace in the CHT. However, tribal development projects did not change the life of the indigenous people (Mohsin 1997; Chowdhury, 2005; Gerharz, 2014; Chowdhury, 2005). The governments of Zia-ur Rahman and Ershad identified backwardness as the root cause of the war and undertook many development projects in the areas of infrastructure, communications, agriculture, education, industry, and social welfare in the 1980s and 1990s. The government established three district councils in 1989 and delegated limited powers in the CHT. The army carried out various civic functions to earn the goodwill of the people. In fact, post-accord Bangladeshi governments have emphasized the economic development and peacebuilding activities by uplifting the living conditions of the CHT people using top-down approach (Chakma, 2018; Mohsin, 1997; Gerharz, 2014). The CHT was able to have special status under colonial rule because of indigenous representatives' voices (Gerharz, 2014). This totally excluded area status and acknowledged the distinct identity, culture, language and customs. But the Pakistani government immediately after partition in 1947 cancelled the CHT's special territorial status, and undertook legal, political, demographic, and economic policies and programs with the goal of denying indigenous identity, rights, and needs. The Kaptai hydroelectric dam project was undertaken without any consultation with the community and without caring about the consequences of the project that would have affected the land, settlement, and livelihoods of the river-valley dwelling indigenous people (Uddin, 2016; Gerharz, 2014). The Bangladesh government immediately after independence refused to give the CHT a special status (Gerharz, 2014). The Bangladeshi government has undertaken massive infrastructure and economic development projects by acquiring large-scale land, forest, and waterbodies. Most of these developments have occurred after the peace accord and affected the land that was used for settlement, swidden or slash and burn (*jhum*) cultivation (IWGIA, 2012, Ahmed, 2017; Gerharz, 2014). According to Gerharz's (2014) study on the post-accord CHT, indigenous people find development activities prescribed by international agencies as 'intrusion', and indigenous knowledge as exploited rather than as 'indigenous people development'. Such foreign or top-down approaches are not considering local needs (Gerharz, 2014). Development through tourism is identified as one which not only benefitted civilian business interests but also the

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military (Ahmed, 2017; MOCHTA 2017; IWGIA, 2012; Tripura, 2017; Chowdhury, 2005). Sajek and Nilgiri are two military-controlled tourist establishments that confiscated indigenous land. The website portal of the ministry of Chittagong Hill Tracts Affairs (MOCHTA, 2017) mentions resorts, picnic spots, tourist spots, park, and motel as recent development activities. These development activities evict Jumma people. For Nilgiri, 200 families from six villages are displaced. Indigenous people consider such developments as land-grabbing. For example, they view the establishment of Rangamati Medical College as a conspiracy to evict the Jumma people. The development projects seem to have detrimental effects on indigenous people in terms of displacement, impoverishment, inequality, discrimination and deprivation (Barakat, 2016; Gerharz, 2014). The content of the messages (mentioned below) from the protest posters, photographs and media reports from the CHT indicate their fear, frustration, and insecurity of land grabbing and eviction in the post-accord CHT. Barakat (2016) argues that the CHT has not witnessed true development for the indigenous people as five substantive types of freedom - political freedom, economic opportunities, social facilities (mainly education, health, and welfare of children and older people), transparency guarantee, and protective security.

This paper adopts a broader critical and emancipatory peacebuilding lens toward transforming the conflict and building peace in the CHT. This paper finds that the interplay of six social forces as proposed by the social cubism model are at work and can explain the pre- and post-accord conflict. The aspiration of the indigenous people is high, yet the peace process remained detached from the local people. The peace accord has not addressed the local needs and voices. *Adivasi* people feel Bengali settlers have encroached on their land, and resettled Bengalis should be rehabilitated elsewhere. Illegally grabbed land and confiscated land should be returned to the indigenous people. They also want the withdrawal of the Bangladesh Army and temporary camps for security forces from the CHT. They feel they are being evicted from their land in the name of development of the CHT. They want no more settlers, no military, and no more rapist in the CHT. Their protests and slogans demanding self-determination rights, stopping illegal land grabbing, stopping eviction from their land, stopping violence against Jhumma people are regularly displayed, which is not expected to be so in the post-accord age. To transform the conflict toward building peace in the CHT, the local as embedded in emancipatory peacebuilding, must be the key in governance, development and peacebuilding in the CHT.

This paper suggests building inter-communal relations between indigenous and non-indigenous communities around the CHT peace accord. The central government, the CHT regional and local councils, and grassroots organizations must work together in this regard. Among the most pressing issues for which the indigenous people have been dissatisfied and suspicious of the government are land, resettlement, militarization, delegation of power to the regional councils, and development activities. According to Lederach (1997), three levels of actors (leadership) - influential top-level leaders or actors from political and military sectors, middle-range leaders from the fields such as religion, academia, the arts, business, education or agriculture, and grassroots leadership coming from the grassroots or community based organizations - are needed in transformative peacebuilding process.

The Bangladeshi state must acknowledge the notion of indigenous people, and their rights as per the United Nations' declaration on indigenous rights. The Bangladeshi government's position of designating indigenous people as *small ethnic minorities* is rigid. Since the indigenous people are not original settlers, the UN's notion of indigenous people is inapplicable to the Bangladeshi context (Gerharz, 2014). Despite the constitutional and peace accord's lack of adequate recognition, the CHT

accord recognizes the CHT as Tribal Populated Region (Chakma, 2008). Although the government has undertaken various measures to recognize the languages of small ethnic groups, a legal measure can establish the recognition of indigenous languages and cultures in the constitution.

Despite the denial of the word 'indigenous', the CHT's tribal populated status must be respected and protected by implementing the peace accord. The political elites and other top-level actors must implement without delay the clauses of the CHT accord that are not yet implemented. For example, the clauses of the peace accord regarding the delegation and transfer of power to the local CHT bodies must be fully implemented. Since land is the most critical issue, some of the measures can be implemented without delay to show the honest will and spirit of the peace accord from the state level. However, some of the promises of peace accord such as relocation of resettled Bengalis, demilitarization, and economic infrastructures are viable or practical. Despite the peace accord, the CHT has witnessed alarming levels of human rights abuses against the indigenous people. The government must strengthen the National Human Rights Commission with adequate legal basis and logistics to monitor incidents and protect human rights of the ethnic minorities. Interactive problem-solving, collaborative analysis of the problems and conflict resolution trainings, as well as peace commission and peace conferences are effective for conflict transformation (Lederach, 1997).

The land acquired for already existing establishments for the state and its security forces, for Bengali resettlement, and for various economic and development projects, cannot be returned to the indigenous people. The land commission can transparently deal with cases of illegal grabbing of land, land acquired or leased using fraudulent means or documents or false land record survey. New settlements should be fully banned, which is the key demand of the indigenous people. Rehabilitation of resettled Bengalis elsewhere is not practical and can be detrimental to the peace and stability in the CHT. Demilitarization is also undesirable for both security and geopolitical concerns. But the temporary camps and new establishments need to be discouraged. The army must have little participation in the development initiatives and the indigenous people must have ownership of projects and development activities. The local people must be at the center of decision making for all development activities. By fully implementing the clauses of the peace accord, the regional and local councils can decide on the CHT's development and peacebuilding programs and policies in the future. Above all, for all these to happen for sustained peace and development, the indigenous people and the Bengalis will have to work together in the CHT based on the principles of interdependence, mutual recognition, and human rights seen as the key to peaceful coexistence of multi-ethnic and multi-cultural societies (Byrne & Senehi, 2012).

Top-level leaders from the central, regional and local levels can organize problem solving workshops, dialogue groups, peace education and training, and various community building initiatives to promote interdependence and collaborative peacebuilding. Middle-range leaders should advocate for establishing a reconciliation commission for the CHT. Reconciliation is central to transformative peacebuilding (Lederach, 1997). Peace commission initiative has been proven very effective for building relations between indigenous and non-indigenous or among the conflicting parties in Canada, South Africa, and Rwanda (Rahman et al, 2017; Byrne et al, 2018; Byrne & Senehi, 2012). The histories, identities, heritage, and practices of indigenous people that are denied or ignored in the past can be preserved by this measure. Such a commission can share the truth including the past golden stories, violence, trauma and resiliency through constructive storytelling and narratives. This commission can

undertake various community building activities that will ultimately promote interdependence, mutual coexistence, peace and human rights. At the local level, cultural traditions training, communications and problem-solving skills trainings are necessary to promote interfaith tolerance and interdependence in the CHT, as such measures are required for sustainable transformation of the destructive conflicts given the long-standing animosity and intercommunal tensions (Lederach, 2007; Augsburger, 1992). Empowerment at the community and personal level through grassroots initiatives can enhance self-efficacy, resilience and capacities of individuals, as well as social and political participation (Byrne & Senehi, 2012).

Conclusion

The Bangladesh nation celebrated the twenty-first anniversary of the signing of the CHT peace treaty in December 2018, but the communal violence between the indigenous people and Bengali people continues. It is obvious from the above discussion that the causes and roots of the CHT conflict are deep and multidimensional. To explain the CHT conflict resulting from structural inequalities, political dynamics, economic disparities, communal identities, group loyalties, cognitive differences and fear of the other, this paper highlights the interaction among the six aspects of the cube (Carter & Byrne, 2000). This paper finds that the CHT conflict is complex because of different intertwined conflict elements and protracted because it started since the onset of British colonialism and continues till today. However, it is challenging to examine the conflict factors individually in the CHT context as political issues, historical factors, demographics, economics, psychocultural, and religious factors are intertwined. Inheriting the legacy of the British policy, Pakistani and Bangladeshi governments continued similar programs discounting the needs of the indigenous people (Rahman et al., 2018; Mohsin, 1997; Adnan, 2004; Adnan & Dastidar, 2011; Chowdhury, 2008; Datta, 2015). Colonial and post-colonial states' economic and development policies created structural inequalities, economic disparities and fear of marginalization among the tribal communities. The PCJSS has used these past historical events and stories to unite the CHT people to rebel against the state (Adnan, 2004; Chakma, 2010; Chowdhury, 2008, 2014; IWGIA, 2012).

The British, the Pakistani and the Bangladeshi governments have indiscriminately exploited environmental resources ignoring the histories, jhum-based livelihood, culture and identity of the CHT people. The environmental resource-based projects undertaken for economic and political interests by the pre- and post- peace accord governments have sustained conflicts between the local indigenous people and the Bengalis in the CHT region. Although the social cube theory considers six conflict factors as critical, it does not count environment as significant conflict factor. This study finds the environment as salient as the six factors of model. As such, this paper suggests the need to expand the social cube model by including environment as a critical conflict factor. Some other studies have suggested to expand the model by including other salient issues of ethnic conflict (Matyok et al., 2014 as cited in Reimer et al., 2015; Russ-Trent, 2002; Byrne et al., 2001), which are not elaborated here because of the limited scope of this paper.

To transform ethnic conflict toward building peace is an uphill task. This is because varied parties are to be involved and included in the peace processes. The peace process of ethnic conflict in Bangladesh does not, however, need to involve multiple parties. The process needs an honest participation of only

two parties with open hearts: the indigenous people and the government. The local ownership of the accord and the real participation of local people in governance, development and peacebuilding can transform the ethnic conflict.

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